

Ordinary Time 11

*Sunday between  
June 12 and 18 inclusive  
(if after Trinity Sunday)*

While the lessons for this Sunday differ from one another dramatically, two threads run through all of them. One of these threads is the claim that God is powerful over all things. Psalm 116 makes this claim most eloquently with its assertion that God "has heard my voice and my supplications." No less forcefully the story of the promise of Isaac's birth demonstrates that it is God and God alone who gives life, even under circumstances that would seem laughable. Matthew situates the call of the disciples within the larger context of Jesus' mission and understands their work to be the consequence of God's decision to send workers. Paul's elaboration of the accomplishment of Jesus' death and resurrection emphasizes the power of God by recalling that God's act of reconciliation comes within the context of human alienation and hostility ("while we still were sinners," Rom. 5:8).

The second thread in these passages is that of the unworthiness of those whom God chooses. Paul is most explicit about this fact, insisting that Christ died for the ungodly, not for some group of people who could claim a share in Christ by virtue of their goodness. The theme of unworthiness is also present in Matthew's Gospel, which identifies a tax collector, a Zealot, and a betrayer among the disciples of Jesus. The story of Isaac dramatically conveys this point, for no sooner does Sarah laugh than she attempts to conceal her skepticism by denying her laughter. With its reminder that women and men are dependent on God's "cup of salvation" (Ps. 116:13), the psalm conjures up images of human need and dependence on God.

Genesis 18:1-15 (21:1-7)

It seems clear that this engaging story was once told (and retold) for the purpose of explaining the origin of the name Isaac, meaning

"he laughs" (for another account, see Gen. 17:17). Yet by virtue of its place within the canonical form of the book of Genesis, this narrative assumes a theological importance that outreaches its earlier function as etiology. It is one example among several of the means by which God has reclaimed the divine promise of Gen. 12:1-3 at just the moment when the promise appeared to be in great peril.

Much about the narrative seems ordinary. The nomad Abraham is resting in the shade of his tent on a blistering afternoon, and in typical nomadic fashion he extends hospitality to three strangers who suddenly appear. His offer of food and drink is accompanied by the observation that he is aware that they cannot stay with him, but that they must continue their journey after their repast (v. 5). Abraham is not puzzled by their unexpected arrival, nor is he curious about their destination. Travelers were a common sight, and the fact that they undertook their journey in the heat of the day meant only that their mission was of some importance.

But at the turn of v. 9 the text begins to assume the properties of the extraordinary. Their question, "Where is your wife Sarah?" is quite strange on two counts. First, it seems odd that they would know Sarah's name, because they were, after all, strangers. But secondly, even if they had inquired down the road, let us say, about the identity of the couple living in the tent at Mamre, it is unlikely that they would have asked by name about the wife while leaving Abraham's name unmentioned. Thus their question hints at supernatural knowledge.

More mysterious still is the fact that it now becomes apparent that the three strangers (v. 2) include Yahweh. (The association of the three beings in this story with the three Persons of the Trinity has been too tempting for many Christian interpreters over the years to pass by, but there is nothing in the text to suggest that the "three men" [v. 2] are the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That idea is best avoided.) The aura of the divine is enhanced by the fact that Yahweh knows of Sarah's skeptical attitude toward the promise of v. 10, even though Sarah's laughter has been "to herself" (v. 12). And so it is not out of ignorance that Yahweh asks, "Why did Sarah laugh?" (v. 13); rather, the question becomes a rhetorical rebuke of the woman's incredulity. Nothing is too wonderful for Yahweh (v. 14)!

The promise of v. 10 is repeated in v. 14, and Sarah—speaking openly now—denies to Yahweh that she laughed; denies, in fact, that she doubted. But Yahweh insists that she did, and the repeated verb "laugh" simply emphasizes the connection between this incident and the name of Isaac. Isaac! Isaac! Like the ringing of a bell: laughter! laughter!

Once more, the promise of Gen. 12:1–3 has been in danger, and once more Yahweh has stepped forward to rescue it. The promise had been in peril from Abraham's and Sarah's faithlessness in Egypt, but had been saved by the intervention of Yahweh (12:10–20). It had likewise been endangered by Abraham's doubt, but had been safeguarded by Yahweh's reaffirmation of the covenant (Gen. 15). So now the promise is reaffirmed in the face of Abraham's and Sarah's advanced age, and in spite of Sarah's doubt. We now know that a son is to be born and, on the basis of the wordplay, we know his name is to be Isaac.

Genesis 21:1–7 is optional for the lectionary, but of great importance in understanding the full force of 18:1–15. The promise is fulfilled in the birth of Isaac and the skeptical laughter of Sarah in 18:12 now becomes the confident and celebrative laughter of 21:6. The equating of what Yahweh says and what Yahweh does in 21:1 is of crucial significance. God's word is true. In spite of threats to that word posed by human sinfulness (e.g., Sarah's doubt) and by human weakness (Abraham's and Sarah's old age), God protects the word, God sustains the word and brings the word to fruition.

#### Psalm 116:1–2, 12–19

See the discussion of this passage under the Third Sunday of Easter.

#### Romans 5:1–8

The opening lines of Rom. 5 mark a transition from Paul's discussion of Abraham to an elaboration of the nature of life in Christ. Verses 1–5 speak about the peace inaugurated through Jesus Christ, a peace that brings about boasting—even in suffering—and also brings about hope. These themes reemerge in a more prominent way in Rom. 8, but here in chapter 5 they yield to a discussion of the role Jesus Christ plays in this new life.

Verses 6–11 (which take us beyond the lectionary text) consider the role played by the death of Christ and the role anticipated by his resurrection. Although Paul makes a single point in these verses, two distinct moves are made within the argument, one in vs. 6–8 and the other in vs. 9–11. Verses 6–8 lift up the fact of Jesus' death on behalf of human beings. The repetition of this statement throughout the passage signals its importance for Paul: "Christ died for the un-

godly" (v. 6); "Christ died for us" (v. 8); "justified by his blood" (v. 9); "the death of his Son" (v. 10). And vs. 9–11 continue this line of argument by means of a common exegetical strategy, by which what is said to be true for a "smaller" thing is also true for a "greater" thing (as, for example, in Matt. 6:26).

Among the striking features of this lection is the way in which Paul repeatedly refers to hope: "We boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God" (v. 2); "character produces hope," (v. 4); "and hope does not disappoint us" (v. 5). Here, as elsewhere in Paul, hope has little or nothing to do with the pallid expressions of hope in contemporary conversation, as in hoping for good weather or hoping for victory in a baseball game. Instead, in v. 2, hope seems to be almost an abbreviation for the eschatological future; that is, Christians boast in the conviction they have about their future life with God. In vs. 4–5, hope is both the conviction itself (produced by suffering and endurance and character) and the future, which will not prove to be a disappointment. Hope may be strengthened by these human experiences, but it remains a gift of God, as the end of v. 5 makes clear.

Another striking feature of this passage is its straightforward talk about Christians boasting "in our hope of sharing the glory of God." Although v. 11 falls outside the lection proper, it is important to notice that Paul returns to this theme at that point, with the claim that believers "boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Here the NRSV has improved the RSV's use of "rejoice," a word that may have been more palatable to modern taste, but which obscured the Greek use of the verb *kauchasthai*.

Precisely because the NRSV now translates "boast," however, readers may wonder whether Paul is now contradicting himself. After all, in Rom. 2:17 Paul castigates those who boast of their relationship to God, and in 2:23 those who boast in their knowledge of law. Those passages could prompt the conclusion that Paul has targeted boasting in and of itself. But the fact that he encourages boasting in the present passage means that boasting as such is not the problem; it is the object of boasting (or that in which one boasts) that reveals difficulties. To boast in one's relationship with God (2:17) is to boast in one's own achievements. It is, even though the boasting is religious, to act as if there is no God, for it is boasting of one's own actions. To boast in Christian hope (5:2) or in God (5:11), by contrast, is to acknowledge God and rely on God (cf. 1 Cor. 1:30), the author of reconciliation.

With vs. 6–8, Paul turns to the specific means by which "God's love has been poured into our hearts," namely, the death of Christ. Along with the simple reiteration of this event of Christ's death for

human beings, vs. 6–8 emphasize that Christ's death was for those who were unworthy. Here again notice the repetition: "while we were still weak" (v. 6), "for the ungodly" (v. 6), "while we still were sinners" (v. 8). Verse 7 bears down on this point by noting that someone (for example, a hero) might choose to die on behalf of *good* people, but no one would choose to die on behalf of the undeserving! Various theories of the atonement may build on this text, but Paul himself is silent about the workings of Christ's death, except to insist that it is for those who are unworthy.

Verse 8 connects Christ's death for sinners back to the love of God introduced in v. 5. Precisely in Christ's death for the undeserving, humanity sees the truth of God's love. As the first three chapters of this letter relentlessly demonstrate, of course, the category of those who are undeserving includes all human beings, without exception (see, for example, 3:23).

So many important theological terms make an appearance in this passage that preachers may be tempted to extract one and build a sermon on the "concept" of hope or suffering or character. If that is done, it should be with the full awareness that Paul is not writing here about hope or suffering or character *in the abstract*. He is talking about the love of God demonstrated in the death of Jesus Christ and the consequences of that love for humankind.

### Matthew 9:35–10:8 (9–23)

A prominent section of Matthew's Gospel is devoted to the commissioning of the disciples for a journey. One gets the distinct impression that the commissioning process in the text is really aimed at the readers of Matthew's story more than the original disciples, at those who hear the Great Commission (28:19–20) and who have an assignment to "make disciples of all nations."

First, notice how the task of the disciples is rooted in the activity of Jesus. Before any commission is announced, we are provided with a summary of what Jesus has been doing in and around Galilee—teaching in the synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and infirmity (9:35; cf. 4:23). It is out of *his* primary mission that the mandate for the disciples develops. Theirs is not the lonely task of spiritual entrepreneurs who blaze their own trail. Rather they are invited to engage in a mission established and undergirded by Jesus himself.

Second, notice Jesus' attitude toward and insight into the plight of the crowds (9:36). He has compassion on them, because they are

distraught and helpless. The comparison of the crowds to "sheep without a shepherd" evokes a picture of bewilderment, lostness, and vulnerability. The image often appears in the Hebrew scriptures to depict God's people at times when they are leaderless and subject to manipulation and attack (Num. 27:17; 1 Kings 22:17; 2 Chron. 18:16; Jer. 23:1–6; Ezek. 34:5–6). Throughout Matthew's narrative, the "crowds" are not portrayed as enemies of Jesus, as those who are hostile and violent. On the whole, they are sympathetic and at times amazed at Jesus' words and deeds, but they remain without faith, no more than curious observers. In Jesus' eyes they are not to be rejected or attacked, but are the object of divine compassion.

Third, notice that Jesus' vision of the crowds leads to the rightness of the moment for mission. It comes as a surprise. The crowds, who have been pictured as a flock harassed and thoroughly exhausted, are now envisioned by Jesus as a bounteous harvest. In his compassion Jesus sees beyond their obvious aimlessness and confusion and declares that they are ready for the message of the kingdom. A very desperate situation becomes the appropriate occasion for mission, the time for harvest.

The dilemma, Jesus acknowledges, is that the laborers are few. Again we are met with a surprise. One might have anticipated that Jesus would then say, "You disciples must go into the fields and gather the harvest." Instead they are told to pray to the Lord of the harvest that *he* will send the necessary laborers. Indeed, the disciples will be commissioned, but first comes the pointed reminder that the mission is God's, not the disciples'. The rightness of the moment and the choice of the messengers are not just human decisions. Prayers of intercession and supplication become essential, since God alone assures the faithfulness and productivity of the proclamation.

Fourth, notice the commission itself and the names of those commissioned. The very authority with which Jesus has healed the sick and exorcised the demons is now given to the disciples. Not only is their activity rooted in Jesus' activity, but his energy is theirs as well. We are reminded that the word "authority" carries with it not only the connotations of right and warrant, but also power and impetus. The disciples are not expected to work wonders on their own, but are to be empowered by the divine gift, so that the irruption of the reign of God happens time and again in their ministry.

The whole commissioning takes on a remarkable quality when we finally reach the list of names of those commissioned and discover who is included. Some members of the group are singled out by their family associations ("his brother" and "son of . . ."), but three carry unusual distinctions that force us to ponder the character of this

band. Matthew “the tax collector” is among the despised, partly because his profession is noted for fleecing the people and partly because it has meant collaboration with the Romans. Whatever Matthew may have done since leaving his tax booth to follow Jesus, he still carries the distinction of being “the tax collector.” Then there is Simon the Cananaean, whose distinction is not that he comes from the town of Cana or is a Canaanite, but that he is or was a Zealot, a political enthusiast, probably a member or former member of the Zealot party. Think what it must have been to have a collaborator with the Romans side by side with a Zealot, dedicated to the ousting of the Romans! And finally, there is Judas Iscariot, “who betrayed him.” His presence among the disciples is a constant and sober reminder that those included in the mission carry the potential to oppose the very Christ who commissions them.

Fifth, Jesus’ speech (10:5–23) depicts a mission fraught with rejection and opposition, hardly a grand success story. The image of “sheep [in] the midst of wolves” carries a variety of connotations, few of them positive. But the promise is the coming Son of Man (10:23), whose presence symbolizes vindication and restoration for the people of God.

## PROPER 7

Ordinary Time 12

*Sunday between  
June 19 and 25 inclusive  
(if after Trinity Sunday)*

An essential biblical dynamic of threat and promise characterizes the readings for this Sunday. Implicit in the story of Hagar and Ishmael is the threat—here relieved—to Isaac and to God’s promises to Abraham and Sarah. The psalmist vividly captures the terror by unnamed forms of destruction that may threaten an individual or people (note v. 16, which forms a link to the Genesis lection). More systematically, Paul raises the specter of that most universal threat—death—but does so within the context of the new life won by Christ’s resurrection. Matthew describes various ways in which the enemies of Jesus threaten his disciples because of their association with him.

Despite the reality and power of each of these situations, God’s intervention proves to be more powerful still. The dynamic of God’s threatened people always carries with it the assurance of God’s presence. Matthew 10, with its familiar words of assurance concerning God’s care even for the sparrows—even for the hairs on the head of a single human being!—promises God’s continual connection with humanity. Paul’s elaborate logic in Rom. 6:1b–11 labors to assert that life in Christ is even more powerful, even more pervasive, than the power and pervasiveness of death. The psalmist displays a faith in God’s protection for those who trust in God. Isaac is redeemed by Abraham’s harsh treatment of Hagar and Ishmael, but they in turn are redeemed by the promised protection of God.

God’s presence in all these situations in turn makes a claim for faithfulness and loyalty. Faithfulness and loyalty are not preconditions for God’s presence; nevertheless, the presence and promise of God assert God’s claim in human life. In the terms of Matt. 10, the disciple and the teacher are profoundly connected. The disciple cannot rightly seek the protection of the teacher without also living in the light of that connection.